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More than a century ago, a group of Mt. Pleasant Township (Westmoreland Co.) residents banded together to bring a nascent communications technology to the area. "The phone companies wouldn't provide the service, so the people said, 'We have to do it ourselves,'" said Dennis Cutrell, president of Citizens Fiber.

With one local operator and a series of hand-crank telephones, the Citizens Telephone Company of Kecksburg started connecting area miners and farmers to each other and the outside world in 1906. The family-owned company began offering cable television and dial-up internet service in the 1990s, but the past 10 years have brought more changes than the previous 100 years combined. The company renamed itself Citizens Fiber in 2015 and, in November, completed the switch of 2,500 cable modem



customers to fiber-optic cable.

"You have to change and adapt, or you're going to be irrelevant," said Operations Manager Zach Cutrell. While Citizens Fiber has been investing in fiber-optic technology since 2008, to the tune of \$5 million, it more recently has been offering internet service with upload and download speeds of up to 1,000 megabits per second, or Mbps. "Gigabit internet is the new buzzword, and we're trying to be one of the first in the state to offer it," Dennis Cutrell said. "That's a real big feather in our cap."

At such high speeds, customers in a 100-square-mile section of southwestern Westmoreland County have the kind of internet access that residents in other remote, rural parts of the country only dream of. "You could be living on a farm that's off the road half a mile, and if you're hooked up with fiber, you can enjoy the same service as someone in downtown Pittsburgh," Dennis Cutrell said.

Small providers such as Citizens Fiber are helping less-populated areas of the United States overcome what can be a technology deficit. "Our members are embracing fiber-optic technology and actually wiring their communities for home connections," said Shirley Bloomfield, CEO of NTCA-The Rural Broadband Association, formerly the National Telecommunications Cooperative Association.

A 2015 survey of the association's 800 independent members showed that 75 percent were able to offer at least 25 Mbps of download speed to customers, meeting the Federal Communications Commission definition of broadband internet service. However, the cost to deploy fiber networks was cited by 91 percent of respondents as the No. 1 barrier to its widespread availability. "The real digital divide within rural America is between the larger carriers and the community-based providers, in terms of who's upgrading their network," Bloomfield said.

To offset the high cost, Citizens Fiber in the past year began efforts to expand its customer base. The company signed a franchise agreement with Greensburg last year and is negotiating a similar agreement with Latrobe. By establishing "fiber zones" and "fiberhoods," Citizens has been collecting data through Google Maps to determine which areas are the most ripe for expansion. "You can see (on the map) the areas where people are interested. So for us, it's just finding a way to effectively build to those people and get them hooked up," said Ken Cutrell, the company's data engineer.

Cousins Zach and Ken Cutrell, the fifth generation of family members to be involved with the business, lament that more people aren't staying and raising families in the community. High-speed internet is one piece of infrastructure that can attract companies and employees to the area, they said. "A lot of our friends and family have moved out of this area to seek positions elsewhere. ... We want to make this area attractive to new businesses that are looking for this high-speed technology," said Zach Cutrell, 30. "With good infrastructure, it makes Greensburg a more attractive place for people like us who are younger and in technology-based jobs."

Zach Cutrell, one of 25 employees at the Mammoth-based company, said competing against cable giants such as Armstrong and Comcast often feels like a David-versus-Goliath scenario. "That doesn't discourage us," he said. "Right now, we have pretty good weapons. We're not playing with stones." — *Pittsburgh Tribune-Review*

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It was a very exciting start to 2017 for Sam-Son Productions Inc. and SSPTV. The new year marks the 23rd anniversary of the Hazleton area's first local news broadcast. "Local News 13" debuted Jan. 4, 1994, on Service Electric Cablevision.

Many more locally produced shows followed, including "The Sam Lesante Show" and "The Girls," produced in SSPTV's state-of-the-art television studios in downtown Hazleton. SSPTV's news division began 2017 with a new look. "We wanted to freshen things up for the new year with a new look for our flagship news program and a new name that better reflects our identity," said Jeannine Lesante Mazurkiwecz, vice president of sales/marketing at Sam-Son Productions. "We launched 'SSPTV News' to continue to provide our viewers with the latest news and information along with our media partner, the Hazleton Standard-Speaker."

The format features hyper-local news with headlines, sports, weather and the popular feature segments that distinguish "SSPTV News" from other news programs with the philosophy of "neighbor talking to neighbor." "SSPTV News" is broadcast on Channel 13 and high-definition Channel 513 on Service Electric in Hazleton. SSPTV programs also can be seen 24 hours a day, seven days a week, at SSPTV.com, or on Facebook. "We would like to thank our loyal viewers for their continued support of our locally owned, family business," said Sam Lesante Jr., vice president and production manager. "We have been very fortunate to have the opportunity to not only produce local and regional programming but to also work with international celebrity, Lea Salonga, to produce a commercial that has been aired worldwide." — *Hazleton Standard-Speaker*



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